Country Roads

Mirliton Nation

Inside the online community preserving the Louisiana vegetable pear, one seed at a time

by Jordan LaHaye Fontenot

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There are still places, in this godforsaken Internet age, where people share seeds.

If you can push your way through the mindless scroll of beauty-filtered influencers, AI-generated bunnies on trampolines, ads, ads, ads—there is still a place on the web where a single, specific interest draws thousands ready to obsess, to exchange knowledge, to share selfies in front of the prized *thing* that drew them all together.

In this case, that thing is a vegetable: the mirliton.

Lance Hill debuted the mirliton.org website in 2011, just as the age of the decentralized, forum-friendly internet was sunsetting, making way for the reigning influence of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Hill's corner of the Internet is reminiscent of the before-times, when the web's power to collapse distance through shared obsessions was its greatest charm.

Fourteen years later, mirliton.org has expanded into a Facebook Group with 13,000 members, though it holds fast to the haphazard, uncurated, and assuredly human characteristics of its origins. This is a place that mimics the

old ways of the tight-knit neighborhood. There's oohing and ahhing over one member's first ever bumper crop, questions about how to construct a trellis, debates about whether or not to use parmesan in a dressing.

Photos of the bulbous, green (and occasionally white) fruit are preserved in digital piles you can almost picture on your grandmother's kitchen counter. And just as it was once passed down orally, from one generation to the next, from one neighbor to another, knowledge is held here: in the captions, in the comment sections, in the photos.

When Hill launched the website, in conjunction with a nonprofit by the same name, this was his dream: to foster and support a new generation of mirliton growers in the Gulf South, and particularly South Louisiana.

The Origins of Mirliton in Louisiana

Mirliton, or *Sechium edule*, is better known as chayote throughout the United States, though it is also called by the names "vegetable pear," "custard marrow," "one-seeded cucumber," "mango squash," and "cho-cho." Botanically considered a fruit but treated as a vegetable in global culinary practices, the plant is a fast-growing, climbing perennial vine that is part of the gourd family. The fruit itself is similar in texture and shape to a squash, but with a mild, delicate flavor and a crisper bite when raw. A single vine can grow to around forty feet and produce hundreds of fruits.

The plant originates in Mesoamerica, but mirliton has been an important part of Louisiana gardening and culinary cultures since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars have debated which specific immigrant group brought it to New Orleans, though likely, it was more than one. Hill's widely-accepted theory is that the main transporters of mirliton to Louisiana were Haitian refugees who arrived in the New Orleans area between 1789 and 1815. His reasoning is based on the fact that the variety Haitians would have had access to would have been adapted to growing at sea level—but even more so because there have always only ever been two places in the world where the "chayote" is called a "mirliton": Haiti and Louisiana.

> "The mirliton group. It's such a tight-knit community. Everyone is so uplifting, they're like your garden cheerleaders . . . if it wasn't for the group, I probably would have just threw in the towel. But Dr. Lance especially is so encouraging, and, I don't know, he makes you feel like you're just part of some amazing mission." — Michelle Glore

Within a decade or so, mirliton vines were an ornamental feature throughout the city's neighborhoods, and the fruit a staple in many families' diets. "Historically, people considered it a poor person's food," said David Hubbell, a Louisiana transplant to Mobile, Alabama and a mirliton grower. "It grew kind of wild. But in New Orleans, there were all these big, Catholic families living

on small amounts of land. One plant might produce over one hundred mirlitons in a season. You could feed a lot of mouths with those yields."

Quietly, without much fanfare, the mirliton embedded itself into the folk culture of Louisiana cuisine. New Orleanians would eat it in soups and in casseroles, slice it up for salad. Following a November harvest, they'd stuff mirlitons to bursting with shrimp and crabmeat and place them at the heart of their Thanksgiving and Christmas tables.

And the vine spread beyond New Orleans, too—taking root in the surrounding River Parishes and even all the way up to North Louisiana, evolving culturally and genetically as it did.

"I have memories of it as just a type of staple for Louisiana and New Orleans," said Hubbell, whose grandparents were from the River Parishes, his parents from Metairie. "When I was born, we moved to Texas, so when we'd come back to Louisiana, we'd have these food-centric celebrations, and in the fall, we'd always have mirliton casseroles, stuffed mirliton, mirliton pies."

[Read this: "The Bright, Sweet Things at Land's End—In Plaquemines Parish, the legacy of Louisiana's citrus industry clings to memory, to community, and to annual prayers for a harvest unbattered"]

Grower James LeBlanc remembers driving around St. John Parish as a kid and seeing mirliton vines growing along the canal sides. "It was a common vegetable that was plentiful with a lot of the old timers," he said. "My dad grew it on and off until he was ninety-two years old . . . our family was poor, and traditionally we'd stuff our mirliton with ground beef, because that was the cheapest option." Shrimp was a luxury, he said, but he and his siblings would sometimes catch river shrimp from the Mississippi River as kids and use it for mirliton dishes. "And my grandmother would make it with shrimp occasionally."

"It was just a staple crop that people grew out here," said Lucy, Louisiana grower Kim Mathieu. "I grew up with it as a kid, so it's always been kind of nostalgic for me."

Grower Michelle Glore of Paradis, Louisiana remembers wandering through her grandfather's wild, untamed garden—mirliton vines everywhere. "I loved walking back there with him," she said. "It always made me want to grow mirliton."

The Lost Fruit

Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mirliton was only available from your garden or your neighbors'. But in the mid-1990s, Louisiana started importing chayotes from Latin America, and a smoother, larger, more uniform version of the fruit became available in grocery stores.

So, when Hill's backyard mirliton vine died in a freeze in 1995, he took the advice of local growers; he purchased a fruit from the grocery store and buried it in the ground. Every growing season for the next decade, he'd keep trying this method, each time to no avail. Around 2007, he decided instead to

seek out a Louisiana heirloom mirliton plant like the one he had originally grown. Except, he quickly realized, there were virtually none left.

> "When I hold these mirliton in my hands. I think about the history of what it took for me to get it. My uncle got it from Mr. Boudreau, and Mr. Boudreau traded some with my great Uncle Robert. But where did they get it from? Who made it possible? Who preserved them and took care of the vines over the decades and centuries? Who carried them here to Louisiana? They came to this country, maybe not through the happiest of times. They were part of somebody's past, and are now part of my past, and my present, and my future. I'm part of this chain that keeps it going." —David Hubbell

The decline of the local variety had happened discreetly, as an entire generation of New Orleanians adapted their expectations of produce to be cheap, accessible year-round, and uniform in appearance. This trend, of course, ran parallel to a general decrease in family gardens and a fissure in the passage of growing knowledge from one generation to the next. What's more, the rise of urbanization and effects of climate change meant that even those who still grew heirloom varieties, and knew the traditional methods of doing so, struggled against the challenges of depleted soil and a changing environment.

And then, there was Hurricane Katrina. The storm and resultant flooding had drowned almost all that remained of New Orleans's Louisiana mirliton vines.

The Mirliton Man

Hill was no novice when it came to championing a cause. His background in activism includes anti-war demonstrations, labor organization, anti-Klan work (he led the nonprofit that outed David Duke as a Nazi sympathizer), and speaking out against the way African American communities in New Orleans were treated post-Katrina. From 1993–2015, he oversaw the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University, a nonprofit dedicated to educating teachers, churches, government officials, and law enforcement agencies in the South on how to teach subjects like the Holocaust and African American Civil Rights movement.

From the same place within Hill that compelled him to act as a voice for the disenfranchised erupted a fervor for the humble, almost-forgotten mirliton. He dove into the existing literature on the plant, interviewed local elders, and collected as much information as he could. He set out, driving around the state in search of farmers who still had the Louisiana heirloom. When he found them, he collected seed fruit from their vines. His goal was to re-populate the Louisiana heirloom mirliton in New Orleans. During that time, he

discouraged growers from eating their mirliton—every seed needed to be preserved, and shared.

Hill's zeal for the endangered vegetable pear soon earned him the moniker, "the Mirliton Man." He amassed a following of experienced and novice gardeners alike, who joined him in collecting and spreading seed like gospel. In 2008, he formalized the effort into the Adopt-A-Mirliton Project in partnership with Market Umbrella of New Orleans. At the Crescent City Farmers Market, he would sit at a table offering, for free, heirloom mirliton plants he had propagated—accompanied by a growers' guide he developed in conjunction with the LSU AgCenter. In exchange, gardeners were expected to keep records of their vine and their gardening practices, and then to return half of their crop to the Project, which would help get vines in the hands of ever more growers.

All a Name Holds

As Hill tracked down old vines across Louisiana, he realized that even within the Louisiana "landrace" (the word for a domesticated, regionally specific variety of a plant that has adapted to a particular environment) mirliton subspecies, there were several subvarieties of the vine, each with different characteristics. The process of tracking down these different iterations of the Louisiana mirliton continues today. Each time Hill discovers a new one, he interviews its grower to determine the strain's history and origins. Over time, he has identified fifteen distinct varieties of Louisiana Heirloom Mirliton—each named in honor of an elder mirliton grower. This is how our local

mirliton plants gained names like Ervin Crawford, Papa Sylvest, and Miss Clara.

James LeBlanc, for instance, started his mirliton project five years ago with seeds from his recently-deceased father's dying vine, which had grown for nearly a century. When he showed the resulting harvest to Hill, Hill determined the plant to be a new variety of mirliton, and gave LeBlanc the honor of naming it after his father, Bebe LeBlanc. In a video posted in the summer of 2024 in the mirliton.org Facebook Group, LeBlanc shows off his Bebe LeBlanc mirliton plant—which he is currently growing right into the trees along the Mississippi River, the vine climbing dozens of yards into the air. In the comment section, another member wonders how he plans to harvest, to which Hill responded with some advice: "Daddy used to shoot them out of the trees with a .22."

LeBlanc has also named another new variety that he came upon by chance; he purchased it from an elderly woman, who said she got it from an LSU plant sale. "We named that one after my grandfather, Maurin," he said. He also grows the Maurin mirliton by the river, and uses them most often for stuffing. "Those have a harder shell, it becomes like a little bowl for you," he said.

[Read this: "Taste and See—The rise, fall, and enduring impact of the Slow Food movement in Louisiana"]

In 2010, Hubbell also had the opportunity to name the vine in his garden—which didn't match the ones that Hill had already documented at the time. He'd acquired the plant from his uncle's grandfather's friend, who had been growing his vine for around four decades in Metairie.

Following several unsuccessful attempts, like Hill's, to grow mirliton from the chayote he'd purchased at the grocery store, Hubbell's first heirloom produced eighty-five fruits from a single vine. "That astounded me," he said. After learning that the original grower, Dan Boudreau, had on one occasion exchanged the plant with Hubbell's own great uncle in St. Charles Parish, Lawrence Robert, Hubbell named the vine "Boudreau Robert" in honor of both of them.

It is the Ishreal Thibodeaux mirliton, though, that is perhaps one of the effort's greatest conservation victories. The only pure white mirliton known to be grown in the United States, this variety grew in its namesake's garden in Opelousas for decades—fed, unconventionally, by the manure from Thibodeaux, "The Rabbit Man"'s, rabbits. After the vine's discovery, several growers attempted to propagate it and bring it into their own gardens—among them Chef John Folse. In 2019, though, the community realized that many of those attempts had failed, and that there were only a handful of vines remaining. The Ishreal Thibodeaux mirliton was, again, on the brink of extinction. A new preservation project, launched in 2020, brought in the troops—and because of that effort, "we've now lost count of how many vines there are," said Hubbell. "The white mirliton has been revived."

The Digital Domain of the Mirliton

Part of the success of such endeavors is due to the remarkable network that Hill has built, first through the Adopt-a-Mirliton program in Greater New Orleans, and now across the entire Gulf South region via his website and Facebook Group. "Whenever we have a need like that," said Hubbell, "we are able to find growers and people with knowledge so quickly. . . we can learn techniques so much faster, as we get more people trying this. And we can make the seeds more accessible." Now, seed exchanges don't have to happen through Hill and the Crescent City Farmers Market, but from one grower in North Louisiana to another in Mobile, Alabama. Members of the Facebook Group often refer to the collective as "Mirliton Nation."

LeBlanc says that he has learned a wealth of techniques that have helped him succeed in starting and establishing his mirliton crop—things like using bamboo sticks or a soil meter to ensure the proper soil moisture, or when to use a nitrogen-based fertilizer versus pot ash. On the website itself, Hill has provided an incredible archive of scientific papers, how-to guides (often with photos), and explanations of techniques he's gathered from the elders and from the literature. Glore, who has been growing mirliton for three seasons and struggling to sustain her vines year-round, said she has spent many an evening on mirliton.org, "researching, reading, and troubleshooting," she said.

The Facebook Group, in its crowdsourced nature, invites the interaction of tradition and innovation. Members share the old techniques from their grandparents, as well as modern approaches to old problems—like how to protect your mirliton from the August heat, or encourage it to produce throughout the winter.

> "I believe in sowing and reaping," —James LeBlanc

"In the wintertime, people are starting to tent their mirliton and put heaters in," said Mathieu. "I'm debating whether or not I want to do that, to keep the vines viable through the cold. To me, it seems like that's getting a little bit away from tradition, which is a big part of this for me. But I'll debate it." For last year's unprecedented snowfall, Glore built an insulated fortress for her mirliton, with a heater and Christmas lights. "That vine didn't stop producing until May," she said.

"The mirliton group," she went on, "it's such a tight-knit community. Everyone is so uplifting, they're like your garden cheerleaders . . . if it wasn't for the group, I probably would have just threw in the towel. But Dr. Lance especially is so encouraging, and, I don't know, he makes you feel like you're just part of some amazing mission."

The mirliton's digital footprint has expanded even beyond Hill's original domain, branching off into reddit threads, other Facebook groups, and even Hubbell's YouTube Channel, "Heritage Unveiled, Flavor Retold"—which explores various aspects of Louisiana foodways, including weekly updates on the status of his mirliton vines during season. "This just became

something I really wanted to be very involved with, to help give my part back to Louisiana and the vegetable community," he said of his now-sixteen-year journey with the mirliton.

A New Generation

LeBlanc has been growing mirliton ever since he moved into his grandparents' home in St. John Parish, tending to the descendants of his father's vines. He thinks often about how the new generation's relationship with gardening has changed, how it is no longer seen as a means of survival —though it still could be. But his kids and his grandkids watch him growing the mirliton that is named after his father, and the one named after his grandfather, and he hopes he's planting a seed.

"When I hold these mirliton in my hands," said Hubbell, "I think about the history of what it took for me to get it. My uncle got it from Mr. Boudreau, and Mr. Boudreau traded some with my great Uncle Robert. But where did they get it from? Who made it possible? Who preserved them and took care of the vines over the decades and centuries? Who carried them here to Louisiana? They came to this country, maybe not through the happiest of times. They were part of somebody's past, and are now part of my past, and my present, and my future. I'm part of this chain that keeps it going."

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This is why he, like Hill, and so many others in the mirliton community, are so passionate about not just planting mirliton, but spreading it, sharing it. "I'm hoping I can, in turn, do that with others, so that future generations might be able to enjoy the same thing their ancestors enjoyed."

One of the most rewarding parts, according to Glore, is holding her full-grown fruit in her hands, and having enough to share with others in the community, "who can then be fruitful themselves." LeBlanc echoed her sentiments, saying that, for a while, he was selling his fruit and cuttings of his plants, but in the end he got to the point where he was just giving them away. "I believe in sowing and reaping," he said. "This way I'm sowing seed throughout."

Anyway, if he does end up losing his vines somewhere along the way, "I know this community is going to give me what I need to start back over again."

Join the nation at mirliton.org and the mirliton.org Facebook Group.

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